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Leggett: The Audacity To Lead, The Folly Of 'Authenticity'

One thing we're not likely to hear Barack Obama speak about explicitly tonight is what his historic candidacy portends for the future for black politicians in this country. Obama will certainly celebrate what his candidacy says about how far this nation has come, but he tends to shy away from getting very specific about how black politicians can overcome historic white resistance to black candidates.

But Montgomery County Executive Ike Leggett has no such compunctions about speaking frankly on that topic. As the highest elected official of one of the nation's largest and wealthiest suburban jurisdictions--and one where he was elected by 26-percent margin even though the county is only 14 percent black--Leggett is certainly a pioneer in that regard. In a speech at Howard University last year, Leggett spelled out just what his victory--and Obama's remarkable rise--[means for the future of black leadership](#) in this country.

Despite the very real progress that the Leggett and Obama successes symbolize, the fact remains that, as Leggett put it, "far too often, African American candidates have won in places where there are large African American majorities, have lost where we are the minority, and have been absent from the ballot altogether in places with high percentages of multi-ethnic communities."

Why? Leggett believes there remains something of ceiling that black politicians bump up against, a ceiling largely of the black community's own making. Leggett argues that ever since the election of Mayor Tom Bradley in Los Angeles and Gov. Doug Wilder in Virginia, "some have asked if these elected officials are 'black' enough? Are they 'authentic?' Are they African American public officials or are they public officials who happen to be African American? Is there a difference? Are we accountable first to our community? Or is the community an after-thought, taken for granted?"

Leggett says that extra test that black politicians are presented with is a distraction and an unfair burden and he urges blacks to cut politicians a break and let them reach out to whites and other minorities without having to feel beholden to an outdated notion of ethnic allegiance.

"African American political leaders will have greater success, especially in campaigns for top elected offices, when we effectively meld the reliable strength of traditional African American constituencies with the emerging multi-cultural and diverse communities which are seeking more influence upon public policies," he told the audience at Howard.

Although black officeholders have won elections at every level, increasing their number from 100 in 1964 to more than 10,000 today, Leggett says too much of that success has depended on overwhelming support from black voters--a formula that simply doesn't work in places where there is not a huge black population.

"We have forged our political successes from the traditional ironclad support of African American constituencies," he said. "But we have been less successful at creating the stronger and more enduring alliances, derived from combining the diverse elements which are increasingly found in American communities today."

And he says that while there are others in politics who would like to make certain that blacks, Hispanics and other minorities don't find common cause, it's also "obvious that some of us in our community have unwittingly bought into this attempt to keep our emerging diverse communities from creating any meaningful political alliance."

The key to overcoming obstacles to black success in politics, Leggett says, is for politicians to focus on inclusiveness--"building one community," as Leggett puts it--opposition to special interests, campaigns that trumpet their positive message, and high ethical standards. Sounds almost as if Obama read the Leggett speech before launching his campaign.

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